9/2/73

MARK 6:30-36
"REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF SUMMER

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

Life, in the United States, is - I believe - about to undergo a radical change of cataclysmic proportions. It happens every year on this date - Labor Day weekend - as Summer disintigrates into autumn, the weather not withstanding. We observe an annual rite of ending and renewal on January 1. But everyone knows that nothing really ends and nothing really begins on that date except new calendars. The divide - at least in my experience - happens now. Life, next week, begins again with a vengeance. In this community particularly life takes on a new sense of urgency with the influx of Purdue students. New automobiles will be revealed this month, organizations that have limped through the past three months will gear up. Friends will be reunited - parties will resume, committees will begin to meet again.

If you have school children you are accutely aware that last week was different from the week before and that next week will mark the real beginning of life - ala the American Middle Class.

Some will regret the change - others will welcome it with great sighs of relief - but for all of us it will be different.

The dimensions of that change can be documented in the life style of any Junior or Senior High School student. Last week the major problem to be solved was how to fill up the hours. But this week the problem is exactly the reverse - how to do all the things one wants to do - and find time to sleep and eat. In my household the dillemna precipitated a full scale family council to work on a time budget and my preliminary conclusion was that we can't get it all done unless we can find a way to add eight hours to each day.

In any case - we've got one foot on the merry-go-round this morning. Most of us won't be getting off again until next May. And it occurred to me that we well might spend a few minutes this morning reflecting on that fact.

Part of what I bring to this sermon, I confess, is the experience of ten weeks in Scotland. Our initial and lasting impression of life in the Highlands was that no one was in very much of a hurry. The contrast between J.F.K. airport in New York and Prestwick airport outside Glasgow is striking. There is probably no more frantic piece of real estate in the United States than Kennedy. When we got off the plane in Scotland

we were prepared to attack the long lines at the baggage depot, fight our way through pushing crowds and with God's help find the people who were waiting for us. But we found silence - plenty of people - but no one was pushing. Porters - but none of them threatening. On our first morning in Kinlochleven I got up early - and at 8:00 walked through the front gate to make my grand entrance into the life of the village. I found nothing - no cars, no people, no shops, open. Only a few sheep sleeping on the highway. We learned subsequently that school doesn't begin till 9:00. Management people at the Aluminium plant start at 9:00 also - a fact I found incredible in light of my friendship with executives here who are behind their desks at 7:30 and who don't return home for twelve hours. And so we concluded that no one was in a hurry here. Life moves more slowly, less frantically - and that we had experienced personally probably the greatest difference between our culture and any other culture in the world. One image will remain forever in my mind. As you drive along the highway in Scotland in the afternoon people beging to pull off around 3:00. By 3:30 the road-side "lay-byes" as they are called, are filled. People stop, get folding chairs out of the trunk, a burner and kettle, sometimes a small table and a matronly apron, newspapers and books emerge and everyone takes tea. It's an important part of every day and totally different from anything in my experience. When we travel - and we're no different from you - the goal is to get there - as quickly as possible. We stop - only out of sheer necessity and then reluctantly. We cover more miles, and see more places - but time traveling is the means to an end, rarely an enjoyable experience in and of itself. And while I have no intention of taking tea on 165, I do nuture the hope that returning to Scotland one day to do just that.

One time, early in his ministry, Jesus sent the disciples out, two by two, for a field trip in discipleship. Their instructions were to visit the villages of Galilea, teaching, preaching and healing. The success of the venture is doucmented by the fact that King Herod thought John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, had returned to life. In any case, they returned to Jesus - flushed with success, exhausted physically and emotionally. And the first thing he said to them was "Come with me, by yourselves, to some lonely place where you can rest quietly." Mark adds, parenthetically, "For they had no liesure to eat, so many were coming and going" - which sounds a lot like what happens in our house at dinner time.

They needed, that is to say, peace and quiet, some alone moments to be with themselves and their Lord: to sort out their experiences and fellings: to assimilate what had happened to them. They needed recreation, i.e. re-creation. IT was his prescription for them, and I don't think it is over-interpretation to suggest that he might have a similar word for us - on this day particularly.

We need the very kind of experience that our life style conspires to disallow. We need each of us - a lonely place - a retreat - a time for reflecting and thinking. We need an opportunity - instead of meeting ourselves coming and going - to sit down and get reacquainted with ourselves: to converse with ourselves: to get in touch with the feelings and reactions we have experienced.

Great men have always known that. "Philosopher, know thyself". Jesus retreated on occassion: the Bible is full of stories about people who puctuated heroic and turmoiled lives with moments of solitude and reflection. Someone recently gave me a present that means a great deal to me. It's a picture of Winston Churchill - in old age - taken from the back - as he was sitting, quietly looking at a pond and a bit of lovely English landscape. And you know - by looking at the picture - that a great mind was at work - doing an important task - in that silent moment. Abraham Lincoln, I was interested to learn, spent a lot of time "wasting time" according to our standards. He was considered lazy while in office. One opponent in an election campaign described him as "a study in inertia". One editorial quipped that the rumor of the President's death could not be documented because no one could tell if he was dead or alive. He took a two-hour nap every day. Or he spent that time rocking on the porch of the White House watching the horses grazing on the lawn.

In contrast, President Grant, usually regarded as one of our poorest chief executives, was one of the busiest. A tireless worker, he drove himself and those about him mercilessly.

We need a time and a place for aloneness. Not all the time. Monasticism went too far: the life of contemplation and reflection twenty four hours a day is not the model either. There is a time for everything: the preacher of Ecclesiastes eloquently identified balance and timeliness as the ideal ("a time to keep silence and a time to speak.") And it's interesting that in Mark's account the disciples never really made it to that lonely place -

s

because a clamoring crowd of hungry people touched the compassion of Jesus and they were fed. But he said it to them - and there were other times and other lonely places.

A time of quiet reflection is a good thing - a necessary thing - even a Biblical ideal. It is not an easy thing to accomplish. For starters, we live in a culture that, unlike Scotland, profoundly distrusts idleness and has made, in our day, a fetish -a tin god - out of busyness. It doesn't matter what you are doing - so long as you are busy. It's even better if you can be pushed, harried, late and running. I have professional collegues who have never said a word to me over the years that did not include a quick tale of woes regarding their impossible schedule. I fall into that trap, although I have v owed not to. But even when I try - you make it difficult. People have said to me, many more times than I care to contemplate "I wanted to call you, but you're so busy." And I want to say now that I regard that as a serious indictment of me - and you - and the whole neurotic culture that forces us into it.

We are obsessed with busyness, with accomplishment and production. And while, in one sense, that culture obsession makes us a powerful and productive nation, we are paying for it dearly. We are paying for it in terms of wealth without charity, power with wisdom, efficiency without morality. I am convinced that we might have been spared the entire agony of this summer if there had been one reflective, slow moving man in the White House. We pay for it dearly, in terms of lives burnt out at age 40: in terms of ulcers and nervous breakdowns, and broken homes: we pay for it in terms of successful people who have been running all their lives and conclude - when a moment of reflection is forced on them - that they have nothing.

So it's difficult - this business of finding the lonely place and quiet time. Our whole culture is stacked against us. But there is more to the problem. In moments of solitude, we think our minds run free we confront, whether we want to or not, our selves. We remember dreams and goals, perhaps failures: we can't help but think about the present and the future. We can become sad - or even angry in our aloneness. We meet the person who really is US , and sometimes we don't like who we meet.

In his little manual of Christian Fellowship, Life Together, Dietrick Bonhoeffer, devoted an entire chapter to The Day Alone. In it he observed, "Many people seek fellowship

because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people." (Busyness can be an escape from the self we cannot bear to confront. Other people can become the tools we use to avoid self-awareness.

It is difficult - but it is necessary none the less. Psychologically, we need to learn to trust ourselves. In current clinical jargon, to own our feelings. We need to look at ourselves in the mirror of our minds - to see who we are: to identify and own up to the feelings we have experienced: to affirm ourselves - by saying - in reflection: ("yes, that made me angry") but ("no, I didn't need to express my anger in that way.") In terms of human relationships we are learning that autonomy is terribly important if a relationship is to be authentic. Put in simpler terms, we must feel alright about being alone - being ourselves alone - before we can be with another person. Marriages contracted on the basis of need are often headed for trouble. That's a bit difficult to handle because we've always thought the reverse had to be true. But now we know - healthy persons don't neurotically need each other - as a crutch - but openly, honestly want each other.

Kahlil Gibran said it some time ago in a bit of poetry that I use in the marriage ceremony whenever I have the opportunity:

> "Let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
>
> Love one another, but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf. Sing and dance together and be joyous but let each one of you be alone. Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music. And stand together yet not too near together: for the Pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

In terms of our families, we are learning that our concern for "togetherness" can be overdone and become destructive. We know now that successful families provide time and space for each person to be alone and quiet. Mother and Dad need time together and alone - and if they are wise they'll find a way to take it. Each of them needs, in additon, solitude. Children don't need programmed activity 24 hours a day: they do need to be left alone periodically to do their private thinking and reflecting.

Solitude, reflection - cultivate the discipline of silence and listening. IT's

amazing what you can hear when you're quiet. And it's equally amazing what can happen by way of healing and helping when you listen quietly to someone else talk.

Spiritually, a lonely place - a quiet time can be like a drink of fresh, cool water. A philosopher once noted that it's a rare man who can spend one full minute in lonely silence without thinking about God. That's a favorite of mine because I have so often found it to be true.

And yet the words aren't quite right. Given our own predisposition we may or may not think about God. What I believe - and what the whole theology of the Reforemed tradition tells me - is that God comes to us. It's not, that is to say, the meandering of an idle mind that causes us to think deep thoughts: rather it is the restless, moving Spirit of God himself, looking for us, provoking our thinking.

Again, Bonhoeffer said it plainly: "The time of meditation does not let us down into the void and abyss of loneliness: it lets us be alone with the Word... it will surely come just as surely as God Himself has come to men and will come again." P&L

We are called to be disciples out in a busy world that allows little time for aloneness. We are called to discipleship within the context of the busy schedules we will keep this fall; schedules that, if we allow them, can fill every hour and leave us empty spiritually.

Take time: make time in which the waters of your spirit can flow deeply: in which your thinking can run freely: in which the Spirit of God can speak to your spirit. Find your lonely place. AMEN

Father, we know you are there amidst the busy noises of life. Grant us, this year, a new sensitivity to your presence: and when we are alone speak to us in your still, small voice of calm: through JESUS Christ our Lord. AMEN